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ABSTRACT

Marketing is a venue which could help establish counselors in the public consciousness so that a multitude of other publics become counselor advocates and articulate that professional counselors are skilled deliverers of services. Marketing strategies include: walking, talking, and acting proud of self as a professional; taking pride in total appearance; taking advantage of self-enhancement opportunities; displaying professional office decorum; designing something to market and marketing the outcomes; joining professional organizations; articulating the positive; marketing specifics; and being politically astute. (ABL)



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# ERIC DIGEST

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## Marketing Yourself as a Professional Counselor

*Beverly J. O'Bryant*

### The Goal

True discovery is not seeing new things but seeing with new eyes. Marketing ourselves as professional counselors requires that we help our publics see us with new eyes and that includes new and comprehensive understanding of professional counselors, the ability to articulate what professional counselors do, and the realization that only certified counselors do counseling and the appropriate use for paraprofessionals and interested others in the guidance process.

### The Opportunity (Problem)

For all professional counselors—regardless of speciality (school counselors, mental health counselors, rehabilitation counselors, marriage and family counselors, alcohol and substance abuse counselors, and so on) the need for accountability, credentialing, and documentation is of paramount importance when considering the most appropriate marketing venues.

Counselors are judged—intentionally and unintentionally—by the public at large via a mixture of perception and fact; and, while there is clearly a distinction between the two, counselors must recognize unequivocally that both are distinct components of who we are and strategize substantive ways to address both.

Perception, by definition, is the understanding, discernment, comprehension and/or insight gained via observation, patterns, etc. It is a subjective estimate, flexible in nature, and subject to wide interpretation by a host of interpreters; and, therefore, changeable. Fact, however, is a thing known to be true. It is generally unalterable, learned rotely by most, less subject to interpretation, and, therefore, not changeable.

The counseling profession, in general, is as strong as its weakest links. And, its weakest links are the masses of counseling professionals all over the world who reference themselves as 'just' counselors...who don't understand the power of belonging to and banding together through professional organizations...who don't recognize the need for lobbying for appropriate legislation for each and every one of the specialities...who see their 'jobs' as just paychecks...and who fail to see or project the sense of professionalism and commitment required for the discipline to survive.

The weakest links, unfortunately, are often the public's *perception* of the profession; but, that they are practicing professionals makes ineffective, squabbling counselors a *fact*, a reality, and therefore, undeniable. Hence, the inscrutable paradox with which professional counselors must deal.

### Correction Strategies

Marketing ourselves appropriately could be our most powerful tool. Marketing is a venue which could help establish counselors in the public consciousness so that a multitude of other publics become counselor advocates and articulate that professional counselors are skilled deliverers of services which initiate positive change, that they promote positive human potential, and that as a professional discipline their services are indispensible.

But this scenario will only come to pass when counselors rise to meet this challenge as a grassroot effort from coast to coast. Our ultimate success as a discipline and as a profession is imbued in team spirit, team effort, team commitment, and team unification. Our greatness lies not in our individualities, but in the magnitude of what we represent as a whole. So to that end, let us forge on *en masse* to implement the following in marketing ourselves as professionals:

1. **Professional stature—walk, talk, and act proud of self as a professional.** Professional pride can be exhibited in many forms, but perhaps none is as powerful as the presentation of self. The ability to exude pride in self and profession is a powerful tool, and, it can be done by even the shyest of personality types. It only requires that one:
   - Speak with assurance, even when saying "I'm not sure about that, but I'll be glad to investigate it for you," and
   - Carry oneself in a professional manner i.e., pridefully, positively, and proudly.
2. **Take pride in total appearance. First impressions are often the only impressions one gets to make.** If the first impression is the only impression one gets to make, it must be inclusive, comprehensive, substantive, assuring and inviting. It must reflect knowledge, ability, concern and interest, and it must suggest that a return visit might be worthwhile. Appearance can do that.
   - Appropriate professional dress, i.e., suits, slacks and shirt, skirt and blouse, ties.
   - Professional accessories: briefcase, business cards, brochures and literature on your program(s) for clients.
3. **Self-enhancement opportunities and incentives.** Self enhancement is made easy through the myriad of professional opportunities. Take advantage of them.
   - Listen to cassette tapes while driving to and from work or while walking and/or jogging
   - Acquire home study programs offered by the American Counseling Association and other associations.
   - Attend local, regional and national workshops and conferences.
   - Read at least one professional journal a month.
   - Commit to memory titles, authors, major findings and pertinent statistics to use in conversation.
   - Network with counselors from other schools.

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4. **Display professional office decorum.** From the youngest child to the oldest adult, one always needs to feel a sense of security when dealing with another. The counselor's client is a human being who is often apprehensive, and at best, skeptical. Attaining comfort, ease, establishing rapport, and earning trust are at least made easier when the environment:

   - Is at least neat and clean.
   - Has a comfortable setting.
   - Displays plaques and honors prominently on walls.
   - Has personal touches throughout (family photos, etc.)
   - Has professional journals available for anyone to read.

5. **Design something to market...and market the outcomes.** Every counseling speciality area has an area of expertise. The skills are delivered through various mediums and the programs and/or areas are all outcome based. Market the outcomes—design a brochure, a pamphlet, a PSA, a newsletter, a news release which summarizes the goal, procedure and outcome of your speciality area. Give statistics which show the value of your intervention. Use professional journals, professional associations, and national networks to corroborate your statements.

6. **Join your professional organizations.** The American Counseling Association and its divisions is our professional organization. JOIN!!! It *is* us and as such exists to promote, advocate, and lobby for us. And, while it is not a bargaining agent, it is the only entity which speaks directly for us and about us to the various entities, publics, and legislators. Its strength is directly proportional to the number of professionals it represents and the perceived and actual force of its members. We should be a membership of hundreds of thousands, not thousands. Legislators should worry about offending us, governors should worry about cutting us, and publics should worry about not having us...and if they don't, collectively we should find out why and act on it.

7. **Articulate the positive...the public is always listening.** Pick and choose the arenas in which we elect to speak...especially when we feel a "good gripe" coming on. The silent public is always listening, and what we say and project negatively will always go farther than our intended audience. The public is like the news media...always looking for an angle. Make sure the angle you give is a positive one. This is not to say that there are no negatives, there are...but for once, let us as a profession take responsibility for articulating some of the positive angles, putting the bad angles in the right perspective and context, and highlighting positive hooks the public and news media can latch onto and publicize.

8. **Market specifics.** "The secret to success is skating where the puck is" (Wayne Gretsky). Concurrently, the secret to successful marketing is giving the public what it wants before you give it what it needs. The public wants to know what counselors do. The public wants to know what good counselors do, and why counselors should be hired over other mental health professionals. Tell them.

   - Invite your publics to programs, events, sponsored by you.
   - Keep an extensive guest list of all significant publics including school and city boards, local and state legislators, CEO's and presidents of significant interest groups, to invite to all events and programs sponsored by the counselor. That these persons attend is not nearly as significant as that they know what the counselor is doing.
   - Sponsor a PSA before every pertinent event sponsored by the counselor—advertise!
   - Send out press releases after every pertinent event sponsored by the counselor—publicize!
   - Use pre/post instruments in the implementation of programs and use the statistics to write articles corroborating the effectiveness of counselor interventions.
   - Consider submitting at least one article on counseling to a grocery store magazine.
   - Attend legislative hearings.

9. **Be politically astute.** Recognize that you serve many publics—regardless of your speciality area. Knowing which publics can assist you, being present where they are, making it known you are present, contributing a substantive statement whenever appropriate or possible, will go far in having them become advocates for the causes of counseling. Be sure to:

   - Identify your publics, know something about each of their respective needs and agenda items; identify a need of theirs that you can help them accomplish, and offer your services.
   - Attend receptions, meetings, workshops, and parties to which you are invited. Make a positive impression via articulation of needs, facts, statistics, legislation, research, positive info.
   - Make follow-up arrangements (phone, appointment).

## Conclusion

Professional counselors must provide the ammunition for significant others to testify on behalf of counselors in a myriad of forums, and the ammunition must state unequivocally that clients make statistically significant gains in overall achievement/progress as a result of interventions with counselors. The ammunition can come through a number of venues, but marketing is a clear, concise and expeditious way.

## Resource Documents


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